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ABSTRACT

Most textbooks, ignoring current narrative theory, fail to explain a large number of published essays containing narrative. To challenge textbook definitions of narratives, three points should be made: (1) a clear distinction should be recognized between narratives making points and narratives proving points, (2) the textbook equating of "narrative" with "story" obscures some of the ways that narrative functions in essays, and (3) narrative should be understood not as a device but as a fundamental mode of persuasion. Making a point is not just "balancing an equation"; it is also establishing a juncture that exists to enable writers to state propositions. In "My Magical Metronome" Lewis Thomas's reflections on his acquisition of a pacemaker lead gracefully to ideas about medical technology. Narrative movement takes the reader from some place (literally and metaphorically) to some other place, a different point. Essays can exhibit three degrees of narrative: essays with narrative, essays with story, and essays as story. At the moment a narrative becomes a story, it has a point, and if it has a point it is a story. Textbook writers usually ignore the fact that the power of narrative in essay comes not from the writer's ability to mirror reality, but from offering it to the reader in a particularly attractive shape. The function of narrative in essays is best defined as the idea of getting readers from one event to another, from one point to another. (NKA)

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Narrative in Essays: A Challenge of Textbook Truisms

Douglas Hesse

At the very end of his 1986 book, Recent Theories of Narrative, Wallace Martin finally asks, "What is narrative?" He answers that he cannot definitely say. Now, Mr. Martin just must not have done his homework. Instead of puzzling through Bakhtin, Ricoeuer, and Todorov, he should have turned to those freshman writing texts that explain narrative in essays. There he would have such clear and authoritative definitions as "narrative is storytelling." This textbook precision extends to the purpose of narrative in essays. They conclude that, except for a few secondary functions, narrative in essays exists to make a point. This pointmaking can be explained with a few rules, and the writer's success can be measured with a checklist. (Did you remember your audience? Have you considered point of view?)

Nearly every one of these textbooks ignores current narrative theory. Now that itself may not be so bad. Theorists justify their keep partly by confusing what hadn't been confused before. An appeal to theoretical complexity, then, isn't necessarily a virtue. However, when theory can invigorate teaching, and when it describes narrative in essays more accurately than "common sense" does, then we should pay attention to it.

This is especially true when textbooks fail to explain a large number of published essays with narrative.

I'd like to make three points today. My first will be a point about points. Specifically, we need to recognize a clear distinction between narratives making points and narratives proving them. Second, I will argue that the textbook equation of "narrative" with "story" obscures some of the ways that narrative functions in essays. Third, I will argue that we need to understand narrative not as a device equal to other devices but but as a fundamental mode of persuasion different from other modes.

Challenge One: "Stories in Essays Exist to Prove Points"

The most common textbook truism is that "Stories in essays exist to prove points." Here are some examples:

> "Narration can play a number of roles: in a novel or fictional story, it stimulates our imagination and entertains us; in a newspaper story, it reports newsworthy events objectively; in essays, it makes a definite point." (Lannon 180)
>
> "Although a narrative may be written for its own sake—that is simply to recount events—in most college writing narration is used for a purpose, and a sequence of events is presented to prove a point." (Kirszner and Mandell 41)
>
> "Here the writer uses narration to relate a sequence of events and to emphasize the thesis or central idea." (Raphael 33
>
> "Readers seek out the point of the story and use it as a mark of the story's success." (Wiener and Eisenberg 56)
>
> "If you are to enjoy a narrative essay fully, you must understand that thesis, the point of the story, when you finish it." (Dobie and Hirt 32).

I suspect this truism exists mainly because teachers and textbook writers see "having a point" as a kind of common denominator between personal essays with narrative and what they consider to be more "practical" essays. We're nervous about teaching things that don't appear to have practical application.

But a problem results from a belief in an almost equation-like relationship between stories and points, with story on one side of the equation and essay on the other. In this view, the essential nature of an essay story is its compressibility into a thesis. A story in an essay is like light just before it passes through a magnifying lens. The "point" is the dot that sets the leaf afire, and it consists of the photons of the story focused there. The writer's mind is the lens.

Now, I accept that a crucial feature of narrative in essays is its ability to make a point. However, I define making a point differently than "balancing an equation." I mean it more literally in the sense of establishing a juncture, a stopping place on the line of words that comprises the essay. The existence of such junctures enables writers to state propositions. As a result, what I mean by the "point" of the story is not the "meaning" of the story. I am not arguing that we abandon the idea that stories prove points but that we pay equal attention to the way that stories make them, that is, bring them into existence. My concern is more than semantic quibbling.

Let's look at three essays in which the formulation "point equals story" is insufficient. First, consider Virginia Woolf's "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid." Woolf presents her thoughts as having taken place during a German bombing of London. Planes fly over, drop bombs, are shot at, then leave. This narrative serves primarily a structural function. Woolf plays back and forth between narrating the bombing and explaining why men are prone to fighting, before she finally calls upon women to "Help young Englishmen to root out from themselves the love of medals and decorations" (175). What's important here is that the bombing account isn't "equivalent" to any "point" Woolf is trying to make. At most we can view it as proof

that there are such things as wars and men who fight them. But we needn't be convinced of that. It makes no sense to ask, "What does the account of the air raid prove?"

A second essay, "My Magical Metronome" by Lewis Thomas, better seems to fit the textbook model. The essay begins with a story of how Thomas acquired his pacemaker. Following it are two pages of reflection. Drawing upon the conventional wisdom, we assume "Here is the point of the story." But I argue that Thomas's reflection doesn't furnish a point in the sense of a sentence that tells the meaning of the opening story. This is true even if one considers possible points like, "I feel differently about medical technology now that I have a pacemaker." That change isn't narrated as an event in the essay. Any "point" comes outside the story, as an addition to it, not a part of it. The story creates a moment when Thomas can introduce ideas about medical technology and not have them seem to come out of the blue. The literal point of the story, then, is its end. That point is marked in the text by the stark transition: "Afterthought." In rather old-fashioned terms, the opening story occasions the ensuing reflections. If we insist on asking what this story "proves," the best answer is that it proves Thomas's reflections have a right to exist. They can exist because they have a place in time, and this place is "after the narrative."

The quickest way to trivialize narratives like this is to dismiss them as attention-getters, things tagged on to avoid "boring" the reader. God help the writer who is "boring" today. But it's better to conceive of such narratives as furnishing opportunities for propositions and their elaboration. Consider, very briefly, "Control" by E.B. White. The opening narrative in which White finds two state agents in his barn starts a progression of ideas about the drawbacks of government control. Of course, the story illustrates one of those drawbacks, and the third paragraph even

offers something like a thesis. But notice that White doesn't complete the cow incident by "finishing the story of what happened." He leaves the scene open. What does complete the scene is not action but White's discussion of the ideas the encounter gave rise to. Paragraph three is a turning point, the end of the narrative, and the beginning of the disursive section that follows. The opening parts of the essay share that point in the same way that two ellipses might share the same epicenter.

Let's try a more venerable example, Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant." Surely, this story exists to prove the point that begins when Orwell writes:

> And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East (285).

But I argue that how the story proves that point is bound up with how the story makes it. We shouldn't take lightly the fact that Orwell's realization is given a narrative moment. It can reasonably exist because it's part of the story. Imagine Orwell wanting to declare that "the white man's dominion in the East is futile." He would face two problems: proving the point and finding an occasion to say it. Telling a story solves the latter problem, because we accept storytelling as a reasonable thing to do. In the terms of speech-act theory, stories are always "tellable."

Several textbook authors have cited the primacy of story:

> "....telling a story is a particularly attractive mode of writing. Ours is a storytelling culture." (Bloom 35)
>
> "In most cultures we find an exalted place for the story....People delight in narratives...." (Wiener and Eisenberg 56)
>
> "Using real events instead of fictional ones, these narratives appeal to the reader's interest in following a story." (Raphael 33)
>
> "We make our worlds go round, it seems, by chasing our tales."

(Reid 215)

The story also solves the problem of proof but not in the sense of offering sufficient evidence. If someone can reasonably place such a proposition within a story, then it is connected to events in the world. It has a certain validity. The story in "Shooting an Elephant" does not so much illustrate Orwell's realization as it justifies its being presented to us in words.

The main upshot of this is that we should analyze narrative in essays not as clumps of proof but as ways of moving readers toward propositions. Here is where narrative theory helps explain what textbook truisms cannot. Those of us who study essays and teach essay writing need to examine theories like one offered by Ian Reid:

> "[A]ction sequences" ...are merely a sediment of transformations taking place at the rhetorical level, and narrative may be most comprehensibly defined as the discursive mode that imparts an illusion of movement to its constituent figures. (223)

I would add that narrative movement is not random motion. It brings us from some place (literally and metaphorically) to some other place, a different point.

Challenge Two: "Narrative Equals Story"

Narrative theory challenges a second textbook truism, one that holds that "narrative equals story." We should be suspicious anyway of defining a mode as a form. The collapse of that distinction invites us to focus on stories and largely ignore narratives that are not stories. I find Robert Scholes's distinction between narrative and story useful.

> A narration is the symbolic presentation of a sequence of events connected by subject matter and related by time. (205)

> A story is a narrative with a certain very specific syntactic shape (beginning-middle-end or situation-transformation-situation) and with a subject matter which allows for or encourages the projection of human values upon this material. (206)

Why do these distinctions matter? At the very least they make clear three degrees of narrative in essays: essays with narrative, essays with story, essays as story.

"Thoughts on Peace" and "Control" are examples of essays with narrative. In the former narrative is spread throughout the essay, in the latter it comes at the beginning. The narrated material does not by itself take the shape of story. However, the non-narrative material in the essays provides that shape. In other words, narrative begins the story and brings it to a point at which discursive comments complete it. The point, then, is part of the story but not part of the narrative. That point is entailed by our expectation that narrative leads to story.

The matter of exposition deserves additional attention. One of the shortcomings of Scholes' definition of "story" is that stories <u>seem</u> to consist of more than "sequences of events." (I say seem because it all depends on how you define "event.") A common way of partitioning short stories, for example, is to distinguish between action and exposition. Notice that we also distinguish between narrative and exposition in essays. What this means, and what we need to pay more attention to, is that essays create gray areas in which story-level and essay-level exposition seem to are nearly indistinguishable.

This is true even of the second type of narrative essays I introduced, essays with stories. The example I've introduced is "My Magical Metronome." I argue that much of the last two pages of this essay might be

seen as story-level exposition. It has been transposed out of its expected position at the beginning of the story. With this reading, it's fairly easy to view the entire essay as a story. The opening narrative might be viewed as an event.

There are cases, of course, in which the entire essay is quite explicitly story, my third type. Works like Orwell's "A Hanging" are perhaps the purest examples. A curious thing happens in essays as stories. The "meaningful" sections, parts like the realization paragraph in "Shooting an Elephant" that are usually cited as the points of the essay, are either narrated events or story exposition. At the degree of story in essays like "Shooting an Elephant," "writing an essay" becomes a matter of "telling a good story." This is all circular, I know, but at the moment a narrative becomes story, it has a point, and if it has a point it is a story.

Challenge Three: "Narrative is a mere technique"

This brings me to the third main point of my talk. That point is that narrative is not merely a device; it's a way of persuading. Time will force me to be fairly sketchy. Another textbook truism offers a way into this issue. That truism is: "Narrative is a technique." I would have no quarrel with it if by "technique" the textbook writers meant "rhetorical strategy." But often they don't. Consider some examples:

> "Narration is a basic writing strategy for presenting action." (Axelrod and Cooper 386)
>
> "The narrative mode, as its name indicates, is used by a writer basically to narrate or relate a series of events...." (Caldernello and Edwards 48)
>
> "...the Writer uses narration to relate a sequence of events...."(Raphael 33)

The problem is the implicit assumption that there are other ways of

presenting action or sequences of events. I'd like to know what those might be. I suggest that a writer does not choose narrative to report events. Rather, the very decision to relate a sequence of events is a decision for narrative.

However, one may choose narrative as a rhetorical technique, and the crucial reason is why. Here's where things get really interesting. Textbooks cite the main advantage of narrative as mimetic. Repeatedly they stress the value of vivid detail and recreating scenes so that readers can relive them.

> "Narrative serves to make your general feelings and ideas more concrete and specific." (Cavender and Weiss 79)
>
> "A story has the tendency of making something much more vivid and real than a simple explanation might." (Ray, Olson, DeGeorge 18)
>
> "Your purpose generally is to enable the audience to relive the event as you discovered it." (Gehle and Rollo 105)
>
> "Getting a narrative to make plain the relationships between events can be a challenging task." (Schwegler 18)

The value seems to be that a close fit between words and events "as they happened" grants veracity to whatever else may be said about those events. But an advantage based on lifelikeness is problematic. The clearest sign of the problem is the way virtually every textbook discusses the writer's fexibility in determining the order of presentation; the customary alternatives are straight chronology and starting in the middle, then flashing back—or flashing forward. But jumbled chronologies do not depict life as it happened. In fact, writing a story is a process of of attributing order and meaning to events after the fact. Philosophers of history like Hayden White and Louis Mink have noted this, as have even some textbook authors:

> "The cognitive function of narrative form, then, is not just to

> relate a succession of events but to body forth an ensemble of relationships." (Mink 144)
>
> "[N]arration differs from life itself....Life in itself has no clear purpose or meaning, at least none that we can be certain of except by faith." (Smith 281).
>
> "Narrative time is more like psychological time than clock time." (Axelrod and Cooper 394)

The significance of a story is that it is a story. In Actual Minds, Possible Worlds, Jerome Bruner summarizes views of two cognitive modes that convince us of fundamentally different things. The first mode, the paradigmatic or logico-scientific, convinces us of truth through formal proof. The second mode, narrative, convinces us of likelikeness and verisimilitude (11). I agree with Bruner's distinction but would explain the second mode differently. Stories are convincing not because they're life-like but because they're story-like. The power of narrative in essay comes not from the writer's ability to mirror reality, then stating its meaning; rather, it comes from their offering us thought in a particularly attractive shape. The shape is attractive because it's so familiar.

Perhaps the best way for me to illustrate this is with a very short essay by E.B. White, "The Age of Dust." The minimal opening action of pushing the girl on the swing gives way to summary of an article White has read. The third paragraph extends his comments and expresses a need for action, and by the end of the forth White returns to the girl. In the final paragraph White goes to bed thinking of the article, dreaming of the girl and other children walking north into unreality. A traditional way to describe the relation of narrative to essay here would be to invoke the concepts of introduction and conclusion. The girl's a device to get our attention and to create some pathetic appeal to boot. But a better reading is to view "The Age of Dust" entirely as story, not as expositon framed by

narrative. The middle expository section is an event in the story. The essay persuades not by offering propositions and formal proof but by changing through narrative the way we look at the girl and her world.

A number of essays with narrative belong to a larger class of essays that enact the shape of thought rather than present it as already having arrived. They are stories of transformations, the writers' as they wrote, our own as we read. They are narrative in a broad sense. We should not judge them against a paradigmatic mode.

Conclusion: Re-thinking Textbook Truisms

The curious thing is that some textbook truisms are actually not bad descriptions of narrative essays in the very broad sense I've just described. Consider three final quotations:

> "In essay writing—unlike fiction—the story is primarily a means of portraying an idea." (Atwan and Vesterman, Writing 11)
>
> "Writers in every field rely on narration to unfold a sequence of events." (Atwan and Vesterman, Effective xvii)
>
> "In these two examples, the purpose of the paragraph is to get the reader from one event to another, to move the text from one point in the past to another point nearer the present." (Calderonello and Edwards 49)

If we define "portraying an idea" not as proving a point but as giving the shape of an idea, and if we define "events" in such a way to include thoughts given a place in narrative time, then the idea of getting readers from one event to another, from one point to another is a fairly shrewd statement of the function of narrative in essays.

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